

Elmira Janabergenova, *Kazakhstan. Songs from the Aral Sea.*

Bidas Rustembekov. *Kazakh Terme. Sung Poetry of Wisdom.*

Faik Chelebi, Tar. *The Classical Mugam of Azerbaijan in Solo Instrumental Performance.*

The Epic Körughly. The Kazakh version. Performed by Bidas Rustembekov.

An Anthology of Kazakh Epic Songs and Dombra Kyuis (recording) and A Journey to Epic Qyzylorda: Three Kazakh Jyraus (video)

Silk Road House <www.silkroadhouse.org>, which occupies a modest store front not far from the University of California campus in Berkeley, is the creation of Alma Kunanbaeva and Izaly Zemtsovsky, distinguished specialists on the literary and musical traditions of Central Asia. Over the years, the Silkroad Foundation has been happy to provide funding to support this non-profit organization in its goal of presenting to the public an impressive array of diverse ethnic cultural traditions. SRH offers lectures, concerts, art exhibits and much more and reaches out beyond the one location near the Berkeley campus. One of its most important recent contributions is the series of CDs and the one video DVD which are the subject of this brief note and which can be purchased from SRH. One can supplement the information provided with the disks by some of the essays linked to the SRH website (most by Kunanbaeva, a couple by Zemtsovsky).

Accompanying each disk is a booklet that provides background on the performances and performers, Kunanbaeva the author of all but the one for Chelebi, written by Zemtsovsky. For Janabergenova and Rustembekov, there are translations of the lyrics, and for the latter's performance of the epic, a detailed summary of its contents. The emphasis in the introductory texts is on the way in which the performers are direct heirs to an oral tradition whereby the musician learns at the feet of a master, rather than by some formal process of institutional musical education. Given what we are told in these biographies, we are to assume that the performances are an authentic evocation of tradition, even as it is also clear that tradition is a moving target. Performers may sing or play compositions handed down over generations but may also perform new compositions created in traditional fashion and in whose performance improvisation is expected. Having Rustembekov's performance of the important epic *Körughly* is especially valuable, given how widely known it is across much of southern Central Asia.

Since both Janabergenova and Chelebi have formal academic positions (and the latter advanced degrees from Russian institutions), one does wonder to what degree that experience may have altered "tradition." Here one thinks about what Theodore Levin documented in his *Hundred Thousand Fools of God*, which charted the difficult path he followed in trying to identify performers in Central Asia whose art had not somehow been corrupted by the cultural norms imposed by Soviet-era institutions. While it appears that there is precedent for solo performance of *muğams*, as Zemtsovsky's notes indicate, they were conceived for ensemble. The solo versions of the pieces are indeed captivating, and one can appreciate his somewhat tongue-in-cheek reference to this music as "*muğam* Sebastian Bach." It would have been interesting to learn something here about gender roles in traditional performance: is the current prominence of a talented woman performer like Janabergenova a relatively new phenomenon, an artefact of the liberation of women under the Soviet regime, or does it have deeper roots in a nomadic culture in which women's roles were not constrained in the same way that might have been true of their urban counterparts?

The performer adjusts his or her presentation depending on the particular audience and venue. That is, audience response and cultural expectations are part of any performance. The recordings here at least in part reproduce programs the musicians presented where the goal seems to have been to a degree to anthologize for the uninitiated from a broad repertoire, in some cases then mixing different genres and motifs. As the notes indicate, to some extent adjustments were made to accommodate an audience on whom some more complex or sophisticated elements might have been lost. The last of the disks listed has an interesting history, in that the recording was done in 1990 as part of a Smithsonian Folkways project. For various reasons, the material was never issued then and the tapes nearly lost. Two of the performers have since

died. The accompanying video, which provides the best sense of how performances traditionally would have taken place, was filmed about a decade later in a yurt in the Qyzylorda region of southern Kazakhstan, the region from which much of the Kazakh music presented here comes. We might well wish to learn more about the differences to be found among regional traditions.

As with any music, its appreciation may take a bit of getting used to for the unpracticed ear. Even though the superficial impression may be that a lot is the same in song after song, in fact there are subtle progressions and differences. Certain of Janabergenova's pieces are quite lyrical; in a song such as her lament for the disappearing Aral Sea, she conveys on the other hand a vivid sense of her anguish. The texts offer a lot of insight into Kazakh culture, many of them being didactic and challenging listeners to respect traditional social and family norms of conduct. A good many of them are musings on life from the perspective of elders who remind the listeners of the inevitabilities that come in old age. A few of the songs are overtly connected with Islamic belief; one might wish to know their relationship to Sufi traditions. One is struck

by the degree to which lyrics evoke nature, animals both wild and domesticated, and do so in unexpected phrasing. Presumably those who are equipped to study more deeply the culture would have benefitted had the texts included transcriptions of the original Kazakh.

In reading and hearing so much wise counsel about values that should be shared and held in esteem across cultures, yet which, like the Aral Sea, seem threatened everywhere with extinction, this listener could not help but wonder to what degree the elites who are benefitting from the petroleum-fueled excesses of modern Astana or other locations in Kazakhstan really do care any more about this heritage. Assuming that the technology to play them will still be available to future generations, at very least what Kunanbaeva and Zemtsovsky are so lovingly preserving on these discs will be available long after the Aral Sea has disappeared entirely and some of the glittering façades of new buildings have been shuttered.

— Daniel C. Waugh
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